Developmental Trajectories of Civic Engagement across Childhood and Adolescence: Exploring Racial/Ethnic Group Differences

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Introduction

Developmental change is best understood when situated in social and cultural context (Lerner et al., 2015).

Social responsibility (values of helping others and fair treatment) and critical consciousness (beliefs that America is not always fair or equal) are foundational to youth’s development of a social justice orientation.

Social responsibility decreases in middle adolescence and shows upward growth thereafter (Wray-Lake, Syvertsen, & Flanagan, 2016), yet racial/ethnic group differences have not been examined.

Research on critical consciousness primarily emphasizes ethnic minority youth’s social analysis of inequality, efficacy, and actions (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). Yet, developmental changes have not been examined.

Due to experiences of discrimination and exposure to racial socialization (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012), ethnic minority youth may have more accelerated growth trajectories of social responsibility and critical consciousness.

Study Aims

1. Estimate age-related change in social responsibility and critical consciousness across ages 9-19, using an accelerated cohort design.

2. Determine racial/ethnic differences in social responsibility and critical consciousness trajectories.

Method

We use three annual waves of data from a large, sociodemographically and ethnically diverse sample of 4th-12th grade youth in California, West Virginia, and Minnesota (N = 4233, 55% female). 24% of youth had 2 data waves; 7% had 3 waves.

MEASURES

Critical Consciousness ($\omega_1 = .77; \omega_2 = .66; \omega_3 = .60$; Flanagan et al., 2007; $1 = \text{strongly disagree} to 5 = \text{strongly agree}$)

Social Responsibility ($\omega_1 = .77; \omega_2 = .87; \omega_3 = .87$; Flanagan et al., 2007; $1 = \text{not at all important} to 5 = \text{extremely important}$)

Family Financial Security (single item): $1 = \text{hard time}, 2 = \text{just enough money}, \text{no problem buying things we need}, 4 = \text{enough money to buy almost everything we want}$

Analytic Strategy

We used Mplus to estimate separate latent growth curves for each Wave 1 age group (i.e., cohort, 9-17; 9 groups) that span ages 9-19 longitudinally.

Multigroup models tested for age differences in growth parameters; age cohort patterns can approximate longer-term longitudinal growth (Duncan & Duncan, 2012).

Black, Latinx, Other Ethnic Minority (White-reference) ethnic groups, gender, and family financial security were predictors of intercepts and slopes.

Developmental Pattern for Overall Sample

Critical consciousness showed a positive linear trend from 9 to 19, indicated by a significant positive slope that was consistent across age cohorts (Figure 1). Age 17 cohort differed in intercept and slope, suggesting that critical consciousness may flatten out for some youth in late adolescence.

Social responsibility showed three different slopes by age groups in multigroup model comparisons. These slopes form a non-linear pattern of change: Social responsibility showed no growth in late childhood, modest growth across middle adolescence, and steeper growth in adolescence (Figure 2).

Race/Ethnicity Differences in Trajectories

Critical Consciousness (Figure 3)

- Black youth reported higher critical consciousness across adolescence, compared to White youth.
- Other ethnic minority youth started lower on critical consciousness, but increased faster than White youth after age 13.

Social Responsibility (Figure 4)

- As shown by different age cohort slopes, Black youth dipped in social responsibility between ages 11-14 and increased positively thereafter. A similar but less pronounced pattern was found for Latinx youth.
- Other ethnic minority youth were lower than White youth on social responsibility until age 12.

Discussion

- Critical consciousness increased with age, showing that adolescents have a growing recognition of unfairness in society. Beliefs about inequality are only one aspect of critical consciousness, and more research is needed that expands on the conditions under which these beliefs translate into civic actions (Watts et al., 2011).

- Black youth started and remained higher on critical consciousness across adolescence. For Black youth, critical consciousness can be a step toward healing from systematic oppression (Ginwright, 2010) and help youth break the cycle of disadvantage (Diemer & Blustein, 2006).

- Previous research showed that social responsibility declined in the middle school years – declines that have been partly attributed to less supportive social contexts. We found declining social responsibility primarily for Black and Latinx youth; perhaps they perceive less support from social or societal contexts during the middle school years, an idea to be further explored.

- Future research could explore how the development of social responsibility and critical consciousness is intertwined with ethnic identity development and informed by cultural values and experiences of injustice.